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The Great Theories of Foster

Literature is a worldly thing; it connects people far and wide and allows them to bond with either common ideas or differing interpretations. Literature is an adventure. Every time you read, you are discovering new territory and stumbling upon symbolism you had never thought of before. Thomas C. Foster wrote a “guidebook” for those wanting to uncover the hidden secrets of literature. In his book – How to Read Literature Like a Professor – Foster provides both avid readers and the general student a variety of theories to help them better understand a piece of literature. His theories show up in many different pieces of literature, but several of them stood out in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby which follows the wealthy and mysterious Jay Gatsby’s love for the married Daisy Buchanan and the disasters that ensue.

A theory of Foster’s that proved to be prominent in The Great Gatsby pertains to geography. According to Foster, geography can play a “specific plot role” (Foster, 169) in a piece of literature. The fact that Nick Carraway just so happens to move into a house directly neighboring Jay Gatsby’s “mansion” and “forty acres of lawn and garden” (Fitzgerald, 5) is no coincidence. Had this not happened, the relationship between Gatsby and Nick would not have flourished the way it had, thus leaving us with significantly less of a plot line.

The distance between The Great Gatsby’s romantic interests also plays a large role in the plot. Gatsby lives in West Egg while the love of his life – Daisy – resides in East Egg with her husband. The fact that these two are kept apart by a body of water is of enormous significance and represents the obstacles between them. Gatsby, however, chose the location of his mansion so “Daisy would be just across the bay” (Fitzgerald, 78). Gatsby pines over Daisy from across the water, but is unable to do anything but look at her house. It could be argued that because their homes are divided by “dark water” (Fitzgerald, 20) the two were never meant to be. The obstacles that continuously come between them emphasize the part that geography plays in keeping them apart.

According to Foster, geography can play an important role in the building of a character. It can “define or even develop character” (Foster, 167) – particularly with Tom Buchanan’s mistress, Myrtle, who calls the Valley of Ashes home. Because she resides in an area with such a “bleak” and “grotesque” (Fitzgerald, 23) atmosphere and a “foul river” (Fitzgerald, 24) running alongside it, the audience can already form an opinion of the woman herself. She is clearly of a lower class. Had Myrtle lived in West Egg or East Egg, she would not be nearly as important to the story. But the fact that she is from the poor side of town highlights the difference between Tom’s mistress and his wife, which contributes to Myrtle being “the other woman”.

In case you ever wondered if weather held any significance in literature, Foster dedicated an entire chapter of his book to the symbolism behind weather. He claims that “it’s never just rain” (Foster, 75) and that statement rings true in The Great Gatsby. The day that Gatsby and Daisy were meant to reunite, the weather became unfortunate – “pouring rain” (Fitzgerald, 82) to be exact. The rain signified the “uncomfortable circumstances” (Foster, 76) in which the two long-lost-lovers will be together again for the first time in almost five years. Foster also offers the theory that rain can be “restorative” and can “bring the world back to life, to new growth” (Foster, 77). By focusing on the second theory, we can determine that this reunion between Gatsby and Daisy has reinstated life in both of them.

The turning point in this particular scene is when the rain finally lets up. The two were left alone in Nick’s house, and when Nick returned he noted that “the sun shone again” (Fitzgerald, 88). After reading further, we know that the rain stopped because that heavy discomfort between Daisy and Gatsby has lifted; they have completely reunited.

Later in the story, the weather reappears as a significant feature. The final day of the summer is described as “broiling” (Fitzgerald, 114) and the use of that particular word creates a better image in our head; the audience instantly understands that it is more than just a hot day. The unbearable weather ties in with flaring tempers as Gatsby and Daisy confess their affair to Tom. Once again, the weather depicts “uncomfortable circumstances” (Foster, 76) and interactions between characters. Without the weather being so blatantly awful, the scene would not have the same atmosphere and impact on the characters or the readers.

The story of The Great Gatsby lasts the length of a summer. According to Foster, this season represents “adulthood and romance and fulfillment and passion” (Foster, 178) which corresponds exactly with the plot in The Great Gatsby. That last day of summer – the hottest day of the summer – is significant in terms of both the weather and the fact that it was the final day of a season. The end of summer led to the conclusion of the story and the last day signified that “last chance” at passion and romance for Gatsby and Daisy. According to Foster, autumn is representative of “decline and middle age and tiredness” (Foster, 178). When it finally becomes clear that Daisy is not going to come back to Gatsby, he finds that he is surrounded by “yellowed trees” (Fitzgerald, 161). The seasons have changed and when Gatsby is ultimately murdered, he dies passionless and tired – a symbolic representation of the transition from summer to autumn.

Foster’s theory regarding violence pertains to multiple deaths and physical attacks in The Great Gatsby. There are two particularly brutal deaths, but Myrtle’s fateful end is the most prominent. Tom’s mistress, after being hit by Gatsby’s car with Daisy behind the wheel, was described as having her “life violently extinguished” (Fitzgerald, 137). This particular act of violence falls into what Foster explains as “the specific injury” (Foster, 89) meaning Myrtle was hit by a car which ended her life – just like that. All three primary acts of violence – the hit-and-run, Tom slapping Myrtle, the shooting death of Gatsby – are a specific injury. Foster claims that by including these acts of violence, the author is causing or ending “plot complications” (Foster, 90). The deaths obviously end complications by removing characters, but if we focus on the other act of violence, we can see a complication arising:

Tom slaps Myrtle.

The slap is a result of Myrtle repeatedly saying Daisy’s name in front of him. This becomes a complication because the audience knows that Myrtle is Tom’s mistress. Tom is cheating on Daisy, yet when Myrtle said her name he “broke her nose with his open hand” (Fitzgerald, 37). The information is given to us in almost an unemotional, detached way; we are simply given the information and not obligated to dwell on it. A plot complication arose from this short interaction because the audience is now left wondering if Tom is conflicted. Did he come to his senses and realize that having an affair is wrong? We don’t know. Therefore, it’s a plot complication.

Diction also contributes to a violent tone in a particular scene. At the hotel when Daisy and Gatsby come clean about their affair, Tom is described as speaking “savagely” and his words appeared to “bite physically into Gatsby” (Fitzgerald, 132). These word choices allow the audience to get a clear picture of the violent exchange between characters.

Foster’s theories pop up often because he was able to identify them as key parts of literature. There is a lot readers can learn from How to Read Literature Like a Professor and it is a great guide to better understand a piece of literature. Passively reading The Great Gatsby would not leave a reader with as much satisfaction as truly understanding the symbolism and significance of different parts. By using Foster’s book as a guide, you can go on an adventure and explore literature.